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Teresa Milbrodt

Seventeen Episodes in the Life of a Giant

Cellophane wrappers from two packages of shoelaces.

I'm twenty-seven years old, eight-feet-six-inches tall, might be the world's third or fourth or fifth tallest woman but I don't care to know. My shoes are so big that a single lace won't do, so I have to tie two together. The laces always break because I pull too hard, so sometimes Mom ties them for me. I toss the wrappers in the trash on top of Mom's banana peel. She eats a banana every day at breakfast (a total of seven a week). I take out the garbage on Mondays just as the peels are beginning to stink.

After breakfast but before I go to work at the stationary store, I finish writing my will. There isn't much to it since I don't have much stuff—books and clothes and records because I fell in love with vinyl at a young age. Mom is worried anyway.

"I don't want you to think about things like that." She uses her stern voice, practicing for the day ahead like she often does at eight in the morning. Mom teaches elementary art, spends her time plying children with crayons and markers and tempera paint.

I say, "I want to make sure everything is secure. I want to make sure it all goes to you."

"You don't need to," says my mother, "you'll be around a long time. At least if you stop thinking like this."

I keep writing. Giants usually go early, in their thirties or forties, from heart disease. I have the same circulation problems my father did, my hands and feet always feel cold, and I'm only five years younger than he was when he died. I have a physical twice every year and the doctor says I'm fine, but I never quite trust him.

I walk to the stationary store because it's only three blocks away and it's hard for me to fit in cars. Mom has a minivan, one with the front passenger seat removed so I can sit on the bench in the middle and fit my legs where the front seat would have been. It's still a bit awkward, and she has to help me out so I don't stumble. At the store I'm on my knees most of the day and direct customers from the register. Clerking on my knees hurts after a while, even

with the foam pad I keep behind the counter, but I don't like standing up in the store. Some people still come in just to see me. Most try to be discrete, but teenagers snicker and ask why I don't play basketball. I am always very polite, very kind, even to rude people. I've won the Employee of the Month award eight times in the past year and a half, which is a record even though there are just four employees.

Around noon the guy who works at the rent-to-own place three doors down comes in for paperclips. He does this every day, says he needs them for the store, but they can't use that many. The rent-to-own guy is six feet tall. Around my age. He gives me a tiny smile when I hand him his change. Some days I think he's sweet. Some days I think he's creepy.

"Hi," I say, "how are you?"

"Fine," he says.

I make small talk so he has an opportunity to ask me out to lunch, but he never does. It's amusing to see his cheeks flush and his pupils widen. I think he's attracted to me more than curious, but it's hard to tell. No one has ever asked me on a date, though I am terribly kind.

Bakery bag, slightly damp with used coffee grounds, containing two-day-old French bread crumbs.

After work I stop at the bakery. Mothers stare. Kids point. I smile down at them and say hello, ask if they are having a nice day. The girl I have a crush on waits on me. I like the bakery, but come here often because of her. She's petite and in her early thirties. I ask for a baguette, watch her hands as she chooses one from the rack and slides it into a long paper sack. Her hands are small and I know she has good muscles from working with trays of cookies and cakes and rolls and bread. I want her to knead my shoulders.

"Thanks," I say when she gives me the bread. It's what I always say. Dumb. I'm too tired to converse. One problem with being a giant is bouts of weakness. It's hard for a large body to be strong all the time. Some nights Mom helps me take off my socks.

Empty bottle of acetaminophen (my mother believes in buying generic drugs).

I take painkillers every evening because my knees ache. The number of bottles in the trashcan is embarrassing, but I have to take four pills to have any effect. Mom says Dad was the same way. He was almost nine feet high. My mother is five foot three. They met when he modeled for her college life drawing class. The instructor felt that having a larger-than-life model would somehow help his students see details.

For a while my parents didn't think my father could conceive. It was a glandular issue. As my mom says, my father's member was not to scale with the rest of his body. But, if it had been properly sized, it wouldn't have been possible for the right parts to fit in the right places.

My father died when I was two, before my size was clear. In all his pictures he looks a little sad. Dad was the world's fourth or fifth or sixth tallest man—not good enough for record books, but good enough for ads. He did promotions for sports equipment and pants and breakfast cereals, squirreled away money in stocks and bonds and savings accounts. Sometimes people drove by the house to take pictures of him doing normal things—weeding the garden or washing the car. Once he stood by the trashcan for half an hour posing for passes-by, a freakish and dutiful husband. The photographers paid ten dollars a shot. If anyone did that to me, I'd hit them. But Dad wanted to provide for my mother and me, knew his time was limited.

Empty chicken noodle soup can.

Mom and I have soup and bread for dinner (I hate cooking and she's too tired). Afterwards we work on my latest outfit, a lavender pantsuit. We make all of my clothes. Mom pins the fabric and I cut it as she worries about my social life.

"You should have a relationship," she says, but I know she doesn't want to marry again.

"Nobody would date an eight-and-a-half-foot tall woman," I say.

Wouldn't be worth it if I might die in five years. Besides, Mom is all the company I need. I haven't told her about the bakery girl I like or the rent-to-own guy who might like me. She'd just pester more.

Mom peers at me over the rims of her glasses. Though she is shorter than me it feels like she is bigger, takes up more space when we sit at the table or on the couch. I don't understand if it's a cruel trick of the mind or the eye that makes her shrink when I look at her.

I trim all the fabric to fit the pattern, plan to start sewing the following evening.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, my mother calls the store. Her voice wavers. My grandmother, her mother, had a stroke. She lives in a condo in Arizona. My mother will fly there tomorrow morning. I do not know my grandmother well, have seen her eight or nine times since I was ten. She sends me two hand-sewn blouses every Christmas.

I tell my boss what happened and she hugs me with frail arms. She's just over five feet tall, shorter than me even when I'm on my knees. No one can ever hug all of me.

Ten damp crumpled tissues.

My mother and I sit side by side on the couch. Her pupils are the size of saucers. In sorrow she is huge. Mom daubs her eyes and asks if I want someone to come and stay with me at the house. I shake my head. I'm an adult. Should be able to care for the house on my own. But I don't know if I can. I used to unload the dishwasher but broke too many plates, so now I'm responsible for taking out the trash. Mom is more confident about my abilities.

"You'll be fine." She nods. "Mr. Wilson is always home if you need help."

Mr. Wilson is seventy-something, has lived across the street from us since before I was born. He keeps to himself—knits, drinks black coffee, smokes outside because that's what his wife made him do when she was alive.

"How long will you be gone?" I say. Mom shakes her head. I don't want her to leave. Selfish, but it's early May and she could be in Arizona all summer. I've never seriously thought about moving out of the house, finding a place of my own, that my mother might not be around to care for me. I worry no one else will love me enough to do all of the small constant things she does. Everyone understands little people need shorter counters and stepstools and special pedals in cars, but they don't think about tall people, how sometimes I need help washing and dressing when I'm feeling a bit weak. My father lived with his parents until he married my mother. I assumed I'd be like him, one of those ancient children.

Three empty paper packets of instant oatmeal.

Mom leaves at six in the morning. I wait to cry until she is gone. I make oatmeal for breakfast, though I'm not hungry. Mom doesn't like oatmeal, eats raisin bran, but she always throws away my empty oatmeal packets before I can. I almost forget to pitch the packets, leave them by the coffee maker expecting her hands to whisk them away. I dump most of my oatmeal down the garbage disposal.

I have problems with the buttons on my blouse—my grandmother should have sewn on larger ones. Because Mom isn't here to fasten them I wear a rayon shirt, one I can pull over my head. I walk to work and hope being around people will make me happier, at least take my mind off my mother. It works for a while. I smile. I direct customers to envelopes and erasers. I am excruciatingly polite, trying for a ninth employee of the month award, another chance to have my name engraved on that little plaque in the break room. An obscure kind of immortality. The rent-to-own guy needs ballpoint pens. I decide he looks more cute than creepy, has possibilities.

"When are you going to ask me out for pizza?" I say. He stares at me. I smile. Sadness makes me say things I wouldn't normally, and I'm anticipating lonely dinners.

"Um," he says, "I didn't know you liked pizza."

"I do," I say. "Don't most people?"

His cheeks flush pink, then almost purple. "My boss needs the pens," he says.

It will be interesting to see if he comes back tomorrow.

At work I occupy myself with customer service, but afterwards I break down in the bakery. The bakery girl's fingers remind me of my mother's hands and how I am too dependent. I cry. Mothers gawk. Children stare. Three of my tears could fill a Dixie cup. The bakery girl comes out from behind the counter to pat my back. I want to tell the bakery girl I love her because her fingers are so delicate. Instead I say my grandmother had a stroke and my mother has gone to be with her. I tell her I am worried, let her assume it's out of concern for my grandmother and not my own self.

She tells me she's sorry.

I apologize for crying.

"It's okay," the bakery girl says. I want to ask her to go out, get coffee, but I don't.

I walk home and can't stay inside, pace around the block to tire my legs. I'm on my sixth lap when Mr. Wilson yells at me from his front porch.

"You doing some sort of marathon or what?" he says.

I walk to Mr. Wilson's porch, tell him about my grandmother and how Mom has gone to be with her. Mr. Wilson lights a cigarette, says I should call him if I have any problems. He gives me two pairs of hand-knitted socks every Christmas. His wife died eight years ago. She was around seventy, a sad but more expected age for dying than thirty-two.

Broken glass shards wrapped in three paper towels.

The glass is filled with water when I bump it off the kitchen counter and onto the floor. I should only use plastic cups and paper plates until Mom returns. My body is hard to control. This is not necessarily because of my size. I'm probably just a clumsy person. Mom says my father was quite graceful.

I bake a frozen pizza for dinner, eat in the living room because Mom insists we eat in the kitchen. I want to break habits. I turn the TV on for the company of voices. Every room in our home echoes. My parents bought the house because it was old and had high ceilings and doorways so my dad could be comfortable. I wonder what he would have said if he'd known I would become a giant. Maybe he would have felt bad about it, passing on the pains, but the one reason I like my size is because this is what I have of him.

Doodles of squares and triangles made while talking on the phone with my mother.

Mom calls every night and asks how I am doing.

I say I miss her company. I miss her sympathetic glances. I miss the way she'd rub my shoulders without asking.

"When will you be home?" I don't think I'm whining, just being honest and lonely.

Mom isn't sure how much my grandmother will recover—she can't speak or move her left hand, but she can feed herself. Mom says she might need to stay in Arizona for a while. She does not explain how long "a while" would be.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I want to cry, but I am an adult so I say I broke another pair of shoelaces this morning. We laugh. She says my father broke shoelaces all the time.

I think about my father when I'm alone, but I'm usually not alone much. I picture him, a nine-foot-tall ghost sitting in the plush recliner, watching me as I talk with my mother, nodding at our conversation. He's in the house like a lamp or a potted plant, so much a fixture that I don't think about it, would only notice if he were gone. The air would smell a little differently.

At work I start to think the rent-to-own guy is scared of me. He doesn't come in to the stationary store for three days. I feel bad because I was honestly hoping he was interested, thought I was kind, wanted to ask me out for pizza. People say it's who you are on the inside that counts, but when you don't look like everyone else, most folks have a hell of a time getting past the outside. I've only ever gotten attention from creepy guys, ones who want to have eight-foot-tall kids.

In the evening I sit at the bakery near the front of the store, a space where they have small round tables clustered together with a scattering of chairs. Fitting on a chair is difficult, but I swing my legs to the side and pretend I'm five-foot-five. I eat day-old cookies and read the newspaper and glance over at the bakery girl. My mother's absence makes me avoid home because I'm worried something will happen and no one will be there to help. Better to be alone in public, to wait for the bakery girl to look over at me and smile.

Sometimes I don't answer the phone in the evening, don't want to speak to my mother because I know I'll start crying. When we talk, half the time the only thing I can say is "When are you coming home?"

Tuft of hair cleaned from brush.

I toss it in the little trashcan beside the sink while I draw water for my bath. I've been losing more hair since Mom's been gone. Maybe it's anxiety. Maybe it's age. My hair plugs the drain of the claw-foot ceramic tub. It's the one

my dad used, but I can barely fit all of me. I'm sure I'm not getting all the shampoo out of my hair. Mom usually helps with that, dumps cups of water over my head until the suds are gone. When I get out I lose my balance, always fear this even though we have a plastic mat on the bottom of the tub. As I fall I imagine bashing my head against the back of the tub, cracking my skull, blood running rivulets into the water, but I land squarely on my tailbone, let out a yelp because there is no one to hear me. It hurts to fall from four feet up. I sit in the tub for seven minutes while the water runs out. Sore, sore, so sore. When I get out I keep to a crouch, no higher than I have to be. My backside pains. I think about calling the hospital, hope I didn't fracture anything, but I don't want an ambulance to come because I fell on my rear. I grit my teeth and decide to wait until morning, assess the size of the bruise. I dry carefully, use my dad's thirty-year-old towels. They are threadbare. Mom sewed two towels together to make one large enough to dry all of him.

My father, filmy and sympathetic, sits on the easy chair in the living room. I ask how many times he fell like this. He shrugs because there were too many to count. When my mother calls, I almost tell her about my fall but stop just before I mention it. She couldn't do anything but feel guilty half a country away, and I've already told my dad. I wonder how big my father thought my mother was, if she ever swelled to seven or eight feet while he was still alive, or if she stayed five-foot-three. I wonder if my father's parents were like Mom, prone to growth, outsizing their normal bodies even if no one else could see it.

Mom collected my Dad's advertisements, glued them in scrapbooks. He's always with little kids to accentuate his height. Some of kids look at him with wonder and others with slight fear, like he's a fairy tale giant. I hate fairy tales because giants are evil and stupid and eat people. I sympathize more with the giant than with Jack, go to sleep recalling his tumble off the beanstalk. It must have hurt.

I almost stay home from work the next morning—probably would if my mom were here—but I grit my teeth and walk. After a half block, it isn't bad.

Just before lunch, the rent-to-own guy comes to buy tape.

"Hello," he says, making eye contact for three seconds before peering down at the tape.

"Are you going to wait until I invite you out for pizza?" I say.

He looks up and gives me a small smile when I hand him his change. It's progress. Maybe a six-foot-tall guy won't be as cowed by me as a shorter one. We're the same height when I'm on my knees, which makes things almost normal. It's a decent kissing height. I blush after he leaves, usually don't think about kissing people other than cheek-kissing my mother before work.

Bakery bag with two-day-old peanut butter chocolate chip cookie crumbs.

I gain weight because I'm in love with the bakery girl. At least I think I'm in love with the bakery girl. She says hello when I walk to the counter and her eyes do not seem to widen at my size. She asks how my mother and grandmother are doing.

"They're okay," I say

"My grandmother had a stroke," she says.

"My grandmother is small," I say. "Frail." I worry she thinks my whole family is like me—gangly and huge.

"So was mine," she says. "Give your grandmother my best. I know how you feel."

Of course she doesn't, but I'm not going to correct her.

It's easy to love people who are kind to me, but I'm never sure how to interpret kindness. Maybe the bakery girl is just a nice person. Maybe I don't love her but her niceness, though I've always been in love with her delicacy. At the bakery I sit and eat a lot of bread so I can be around people. They have free jam and napkins on a small table in the corner. The jam comes in tiny rectangular tubs, plops on my bread in that perfect four-sided shape.

Crumpled grocery receipt for three frozen pizzas, two frozen chicken fingers meals, two teriyaki chicken meals, four cans of tomato soup, two chocolate bars with caramel.

I go to the store without a list. Mom always did the shopping. My trip is liberating and unhealthy. At home I bake a frozen pizza, sit on the couch, eat the whole thing though I had a lot of bread at the bakery. Mom would stop me, but I'm too hungry and have a lot of body to fill. A knock on the door. Mr. Wilson on the front step. He has his knitting needles, a bagful of yarn, and smells thickly of smoke.

"Thought I might come by and sit a spell," he says. He turns on the television, finds a channel with baseball. I take out the pantsuit that Mom and I started pinning before she left. Haven't worked on it since. I sit on the couch.

"You need a gentleman caller," Mr. Wilson says. "One who's not seventy-five. Here's a picture of my nephew." He takes his wallet out of his pocket. "A handsome boy. Thirty years old and no girlfriend. He does things with computers."

"I don't know how much longer I'm going to be around," I say, glancing at the tiny photo he shows me. It's hard to judge appearances based on a picture the size of my thumbprint.

"Shit," he says, "nobody knows when they're going to go. Just look at me here. I've been smoking a pack a day for sixty years and I'm still kicking."

I explain my heart problem. Mr. Wilson shakes his head. "You can't listen to everything doctors say. I never have."

Mr. Wilson excuses himself for a cigarette. My hands and feet feel no warmer after his pronouncement, but for a moment I consider the disturbing possibility I may outlive my father. I've figured on dying at the age of thirty-two since I was eighteen, so this is slightly upsetting, but I'm certain any plans I make will trigger the heart condition I know is waiting to erupt. I have never considered my body an ally. Mr. Wilson seems to think of his as a partner in crime.

Box of stale raisin bran.

My mother has been gone for a month and I hate raisin bran. I am learning to throw away my instant oatmeal packets so they do not collect by the coffee maker.

I haven't seen the rent-to-own guy for two days, but at noon he brings in a pizza box.

"I'm asking you out for pizza," he says. "I hope you like pepperoni."

We eat in the break room. My boss is happy to allow us that small courtesy. I think she worries about me.

The rent-to-own guy says his name is Dale. He wants to get a degree in accounting. He lives in an efficiency apartment above a record store, three doors from my bakery. He likes playing hockey and watching old comedies. Marx Brothers. Laurel and Hardy. Three Stooges.

I tell him I like sewing and do not skate because I have no balance.

"I bet you'd look amazing if you tried skating," he says.

"I look amazing enough already," I say. "And I bet I couldn't find skates to fit."

"Just glide in your shoes," he says without blushing.

I tell him I'll think about it, wonder if he wants to take me skating to see my slapstick crash on the ice, to make other people stare, but no one aside from my mother has ever bought me pizza, so I decide to interpret it as a mark of his sincerity.

Band-aid wrapper and two small pieces of waxy paper peeled off of adhesive backing.

I cut myself while chopping tomatoes for a salad because I'm tired of pizza and want something fresh. I'm not used to paring knives. They're tiny and slippery in my hands. The cut is small but stings like hell because of the acid from the tomatoes. Still, I am proud of my meek little salad and my independent attempt to eat vegetables.

I tell my mother about the salad when she calls. She is proud of me. My grandmother has not yet regained feeling in her left hand. She probably won't. There is no one to care for her except my mother, because my grandmother doesn't trust nurses. Mom will be gone for a while longer. I take a deep breath and try to still my worries.

After telling her good-night, I walk three blocks downtown for the sake of walking. The bakery is closed. I scan the second-story windows, most of them apartments, wonder where Dale lives and if he's looking out of his window and down at me.

Bakery bag with two-day-old lemon poppyseed and blueberry muffin crumbs.

I take a short lunch and get off work a half-hour early, go to buy day-old muffins and find the bakery girl is on break, sitting at the tables near the front of the store. I ask if I can sit with her for a moment. She nods. Getting into the chair is particularly awkward. I feel like I stretch across half the room. The bakery girl doesn't comment on my length, just asks about my grandmother. I watch her fingers as she tears the muffin in pieces.

"I'm a cashier at the stationary store on the next block," I say.

"I wondered if you worked around here," she says.

"You did?" I say, surprised she'd have thoughts of me other than the obvious why the hell is she so tall?

The bakery girl says she lives two blocks away in a duplex with her cat. She hates cooking, which is why she works in a bakery. Baked good fringe benefits.

I tell her I made a salad the other night and it was a big accomplishment. She laughs. We are having an actual conversation. The bruise on my rear hurts like hell because the chair is so hard, but I am past caring. The bakery girl returns to work at five, says it was nice to talk with me. I float home. I do not tell my mother about the bakery girl. Don't want to get her hopes up.

Empty box of tissues, empty package of lozenges, three empty cans of chicken noodle soup, three empty cans of chicken and rice soup, empty box of soda crackers.

I get an awful cold, an achy head-throbbing cold, spend three days hobbling from the couch to the kitchen. On the third day, when the garbage is overflowing, I pull on a bathrobe (my father's old terrycloth) and haul the bag to the curb.

Mr. Wilson yells from across the street. "Thought you might be dead or something."

"Sick," I sniffle.

Mr. Wilson nods. Half an hour later he bangs on my front door, carries three boxes of tissues, a carton of orange juice, and a box of chamomile tea bags.

"I hate chamomile tea," he says. "But the wife gave it to me and it works."

Mr. Wilson offers to sit with me, but I tell him no. I am learning how to be alone and don't want him to catch my cold. (I don't say the smell of his cigarettes gets to me after a while.) I sit by the television and sip from the carton of orange juice, appreciate not having to worry about refilling a glass.

I'm ill for four more days, have several delirious one-sided conversations with my father. I tell him about the bakery girl and the rent-to-own guy, know he understands my uncertainty because he felt the same way when he met my mother. I know his colds were this bad since both of us have too much body to rid of the virus.

In most of the pictures I've seen my father is close to my age, but I can imagine twenty-some years added to his frame, imagine his hair graying and thinning, imagine us sitting side by side on the couch with heating pads on our knees after long days of commercial-making and paperclip-selling. After I've taken my cold medicine and am floating in that hazy space between wakefulness and sleep, I can feel his long thin fingers brush against my hands and face.

When Mr. Wilson deems I am well he brings me takeout, extra spicy Thai food. The curry is so hot I use half a box of tissues, but Mr. Wilson says the spices are cleaning out nasty things in my sinuses. I flush bright as a chili pepper, but feel better afterwards. Less clogged. My father smiles from the armchair.

Cellophane wrappers from two packages of shoelaces.

Dale says that at the ice rink they don't care if you skate in your shoes. I buy new ones for the occasion. Mom is happy to hear I have a date. I wonder how my father courted her, what they talked about since she'd spent a semester's art class staring at him naked.

We arrive at the rink at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning because Dale says most people won't come until after ten. Ice makes me even less graceful than usual. Dale has chunky hockey-playing skates, whirls around the rink for twenty minutes while I tiptoe at the edge. He grabs my hand, tugs me away from the side, says he won't let me fall. I let go and slide toward him, peer down at my shoes. His hands hold mine, pull me gently. For about fifteen feet. I slip. Pitch forward because I don't want to land on my rear again. Careen on top of him. He did not realize my weight, curses as we both go down. Dale's knee twists in a painful way, although not one that requires medical attention. We hobble to his car. I am excruciatingly apologetic. So is he. This is because we both work in customer service.

I don't see Dale in the stationary store the next day, almost walk to the rent-to-own place to find him and apologize again. He was such a bright possibility. He bought me pizza. That night I mope and use a few tissues. He doesn't come to the store the day after that. I tell myself he was probably one of the creepy guys, repeat this idea for five days until I believe it.

"I'll call my nephew," Mr. Wilson says when I explain the incident with Dale. "He's a strong boy. Lifts weights. Could pick you up and cart you around town with one hand."

My mother gives me sympathy. "That's too bad," she says, "but not your fault."

I think on the other end of the line she's smiling. After a week I can smile, too. If Dale would hold a grudge just because I fell on him, the relationship wouldn't have worked. Beside me on the couch, my father shrugs. I know he waited twenty-seven years to find my mother.

Mr. Wilson says his nephew will visit soon and we'll go out for dinner.

Mom's absence isn't comfortable, but it's usual. Something I can accept if I break it into small increments. She will be gone another week. That idea is manageable. Larger periods of time are still difficult, so I don't think about them.

Bakery bag with two-day-old sugar cookie crumbs.

The bakery girl has a break at four-thirty. If I only take a half-hour for lunch, I can leave work early and have a muffin when she does. I learn the bakery girl likes crocheting and her cat is named Cinnamon. I tell her I like sewing. She compliments my new lavender pantsuit and says the color goes well with my complexion. No one has ever said anything about my complexion before.

When I look away I know her arms and legs are growing. Her shoulders widen. Her back straightens until I am certain she is at least eight feet tall and our hands are the same size.